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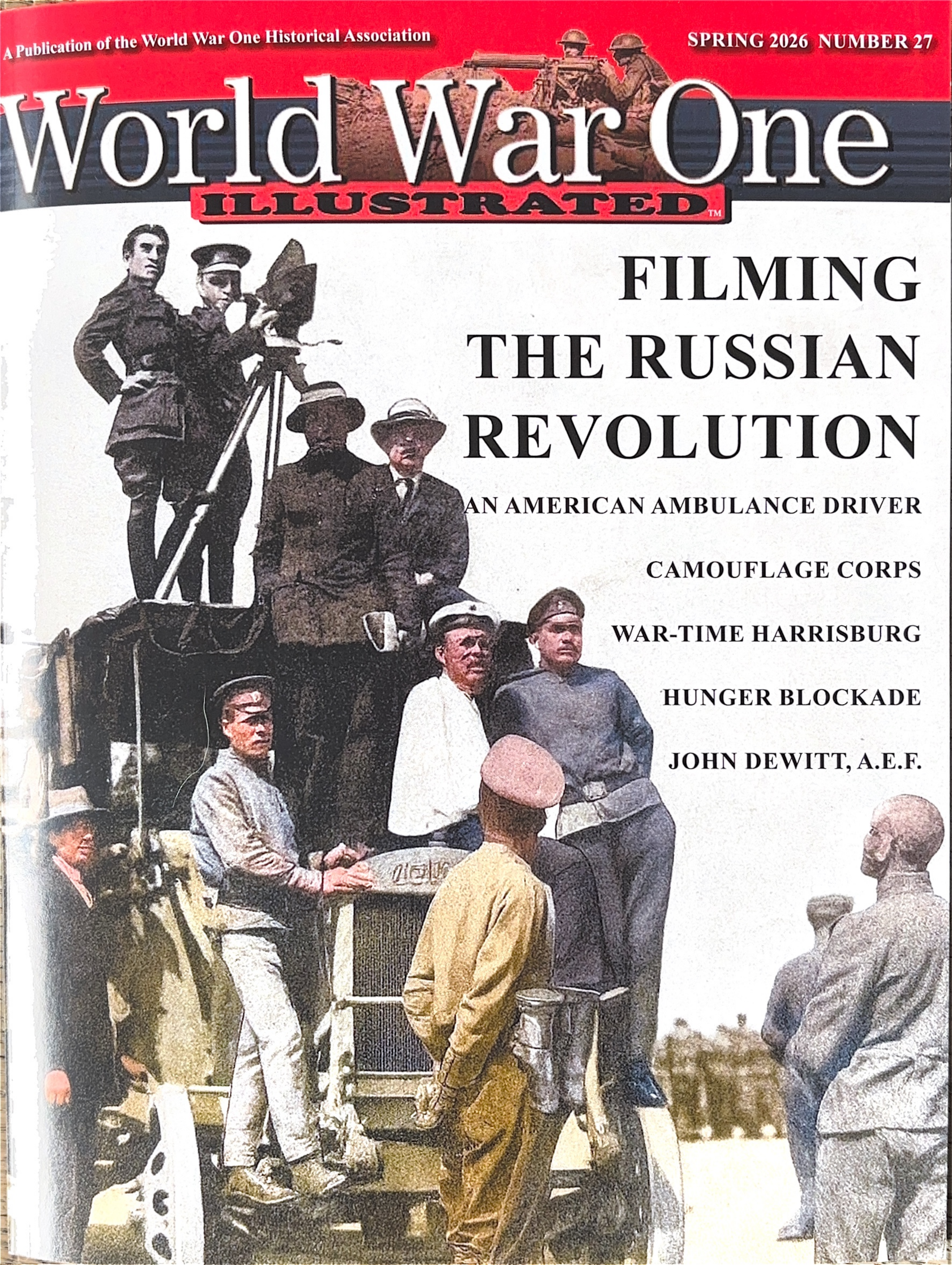

FILMING THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

AN AMERICAN AMBULANCE DRIVER

CAMOUFLAGE CORPS

WAR-TIME HARRISBURG

HUNGER BLOCKADE

JOHN DEWITT, A.E.F.

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Front Cover: Donald Thompson filming street riots in Petrograd during the Russian Revolution, June 1917. (Source: Thompson, D. (1918) *Czar to Kaiser*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y) Colorization by Ron van Dopperen.

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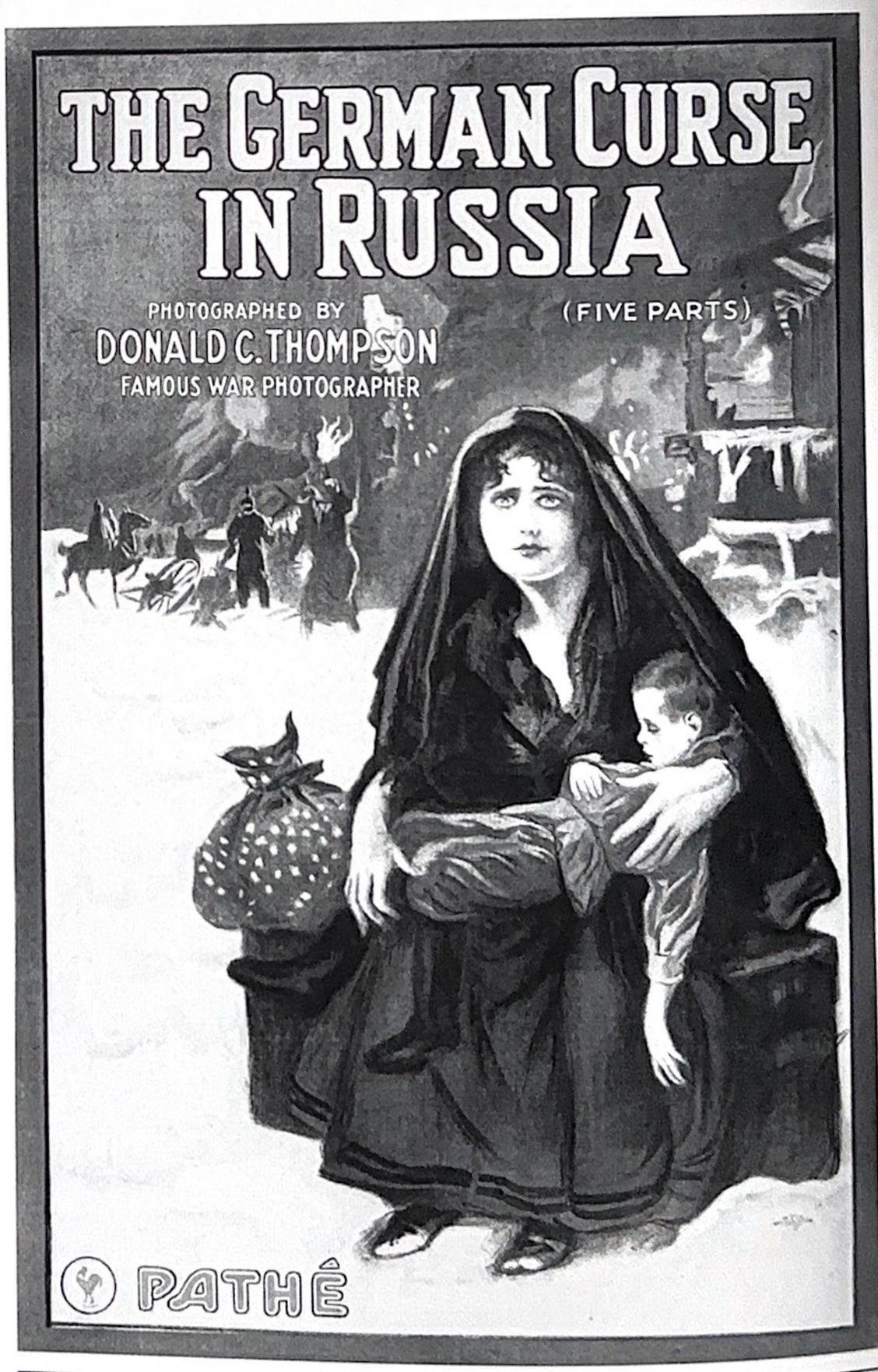
LOST & FOUND: THE GERMAN CURSE IN RUSSIA (USA, 1918)

In 2017, after years of research, fragments of a long-lost American film documenting one of the most tumultuous moments in world history resurfaced. Our discovery of footage from Donald C. Thompson's *The German Curse in Russia* provided an extraordinary window into the Russian Revolution of 1917—a pivotal upheaval that toppled the Tsarist regime, paved the way for Bolshevik rule, and reshaped global politics.

RON VAN DOPPEREN AND COOPER C. GRAHAM

The film, first released in New York in December 1917 and later distributed by Pathé in early 1918, was one of the few motion pictures to capture the chaos of the Russian Revolution as it unfolded. In an era when moving images were still rare, especially from war zones, Thompson's footage became a unique historical artifact—equal parts journalism, propaganda, and eyewitness testimony.

For decades, historians believed this remarkable film had vanished, known only through reviews and publicity stills. Its discovery within the Herman Axelbank collection, footage later repurposed for the documentary *From Tsar to Lenin*, reestablished Thompson as a crucial visual chronicler of the Russian Revolution. With his images, we can trace not only the trajectory of Russian politics in 1917 but also how international audiences perceived these events in real time.



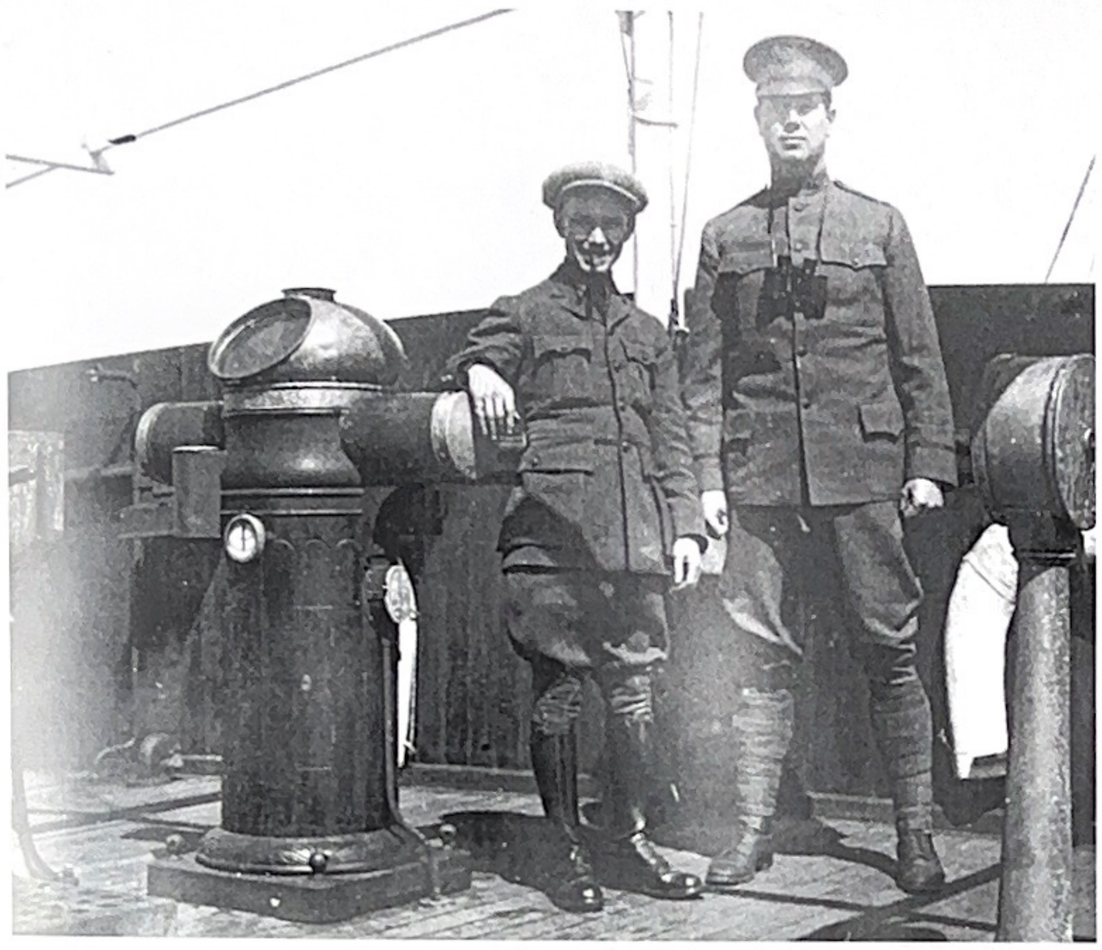
Original poster for *The German Curse* in Russia (1918). (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Adventurer with a camera

Donald C. Thompson (1884-1947) was a Kansas-born freelance photographer and journalist whose fearlessness and flair for drama and self-promotion defined his career. He was once pointedly described by journalist Charles Wheeler as "the last word in impertinence and gall when in 1914 he landed on the shore of Europe and asked where the war was at."

By the time Thompson arrived in Petrograd in February 1917, he had already built a reputation for capturing daring images under fire. He initially covered the Great War in Belgium, France and Germany, often using unorthodox methods to gain access to the front.

In 1915, Thompson's footage was featured in *The German Side of the War*, produced by the *Chicago Tribune*. That same year, he joined publisher Robert R. McCormick of the Chicago Tribune for an assignment to Russia, filming the Eastern Front for *With the Russians at the Front*.



Donald Thompson (left) and Robert McCormick, sailing for Russia (February 1915). (Courtesy Northwestern University)

Donald Thompson. Publicity picture. (Courtesy *Moving Picture World*, 4 November 1916).

Thompson continued his film work in Romania and Serbia. He returned to the U.S. in late 1915 to present *Somewhere in France*, a film reportedly based on his time with the French Army. It gained attention for its graphic battlefield scenes. In 1916, he released his most ambitious work, *War as It Really Is*. Despite censorship and claims of impartiality, the film heavily favored the French and British perspective.

Thompson's career blurred the line between journalism and propaganda. His photographs were widely circulated in American newspapers and magazines, and his motion pictures were screened across the United States, shaping public opinion about World War I and its combatants. His films, often accompanied by dramatic titles and patriotic narration, reflected his conservative views and his staunch support for the Allied cause.

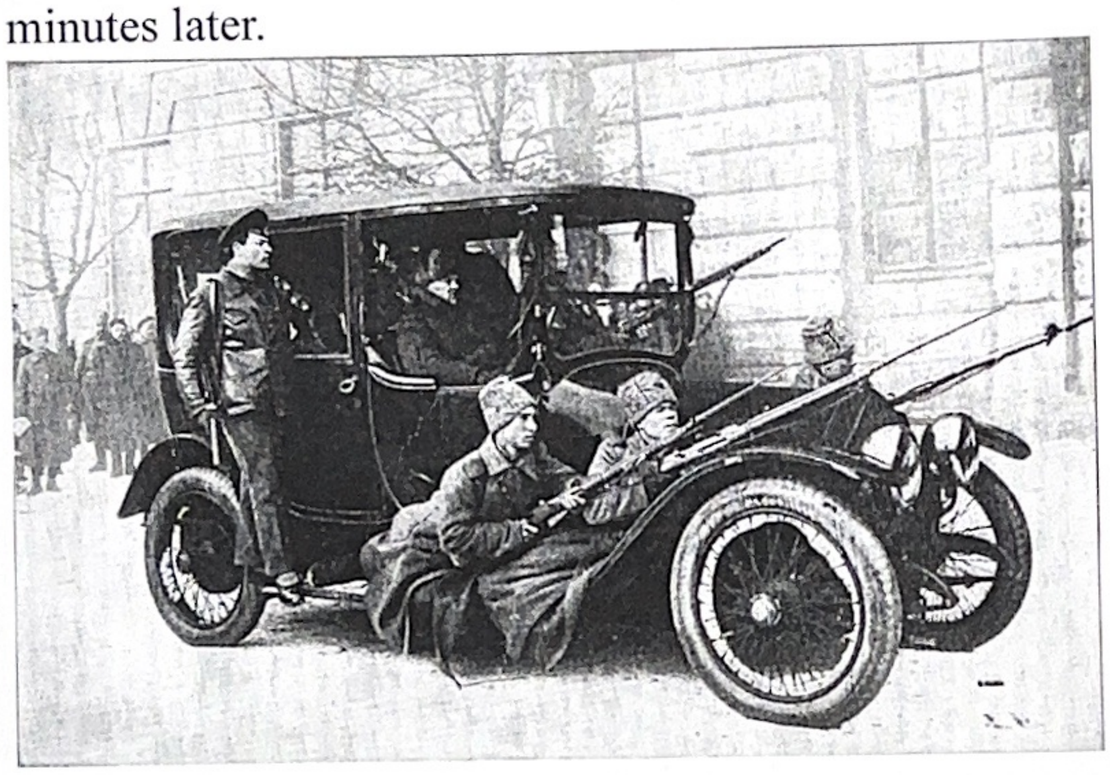
Thompson's visit to Russia in 1917 was initially intended as another wartime assignment for *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, working alongside British correspondent Florence Harper. Instead, he found himself documenting a revolution. Armed with three trunks of photographic equipment and an Aeroscope motion picture camera powered by compressed air, Thompson traveled the Trans-Siberian Railway to Petrograd just days before strikes and protests erupted into open rebellion.

Witness to revolution

When Thompson arrived in Petrograd, food shortages and labor unrest gripped the city. On March 8 (February 23 in the old Russian calendar), International Women's Day protests swelled into mass demonstrations. By March 12, regiments of the Petrograd garrison mutinied, joining the striking workers. Thompson, sensing history in the making, began filming covertly, aware that the Okhrana (Tsarist

secret police) also photographed demonstrators.

His ingenuity allowed him to capture scenes others missed. He hid his camera in a bag, with only the lens visible, while the camera was concealed under his coat. These precautions helped him navigate the streets, but danger was ever-present. From the window of the Astoria Hotel, Thompson filmed soldiers firing on demonstrators. In one chilling moment, a woman who peeked through the curtains beside him was shot; Thompson carried her to the bathroom, where she died minutes later.



Duma messengers traveling in a guarded car. (Photograph by Thompson, from *Blood Stained Russia* (1918)).

Within days, Nicholas II abdicated. The Tsar's fall astonished Thompson, who compared the revolution to France's in 1789. He continued to film events that followed, including the burial of February Revolution victims, May Day demonstrations, and rallies organized by the Soviets.

While navigating the streets of Petrograd, Thompson relied heavily on his interpreter, Boris, who had been conscripted into the Tsarist army and was deeply disillusioned with the regime. Boris was invaluable in providing context to the turmoil, reporting on food shortages, strikes, and the presence of secret police provocateurs. Boris observed that many of the workers protesting in the streets were doing so without a clear understanding of their cause, but he also warned of foreign interference, including German spies. Despite rumors swirling around the revolution, Thompson trusted Boris's firsthand observations of street events and kept a critical eye on the larger political shifts.

In the street battles Thompson observed that armored cars were usually decisive. (Photograph by Thompson, from *Blood Stained Russia* (1918)).

Thompson was keenly aware of the power struggle between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. He accurately assessed the political dynamics, including the influence of figures like Alexander Kerensky, even though his respect for the Tsar clouded his judgment regarding the abdication. Thompson believed that had the Tsar acted more decisively—by addressing the people's immediate needs, like securing food supplies and appointing new ministers—he could have maintained his rule.

Encounters with history

Thompson's photographs and films offer vivid glimpses of Russia's collapsing monarchy. In May 1917, he traveled to Tsarskoye Selo, where he filmed and photographed the deposed Tsar Nicholas II and his son walking in the gardens of the Alexander Palace. Thompson later recalled how Nicholas remained calm and courteous, even when jostled by guards.

His camera also turned toward Anna Vyrubova, the Empress's confidante and alleged Rasputin ally, imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Thompson photographed her walking with crutches in her cell, emphasizing her frailty. He documented a prison filled with former ministers, many awaiting trial without clear charges—images that captured the revolutionary government's uneasy grip on power.

Thompson also chronicled the rise of Lenin and Trotsky. On April 23, 1917, he noted Lenin's arrival

Tzar Nicholas Romanoff and his son Alexei Nikolaevich, June 1917. The son suffered from hemophilia, a genetic disorder that he inherited from his mother Tzarina Alexandra Feodorovna, granddaughter of Queen Victoria of Great Britain, who also carried the hemophilia mutation. (Photograph by Thompson, from *Blood Stained Russia* (1918)).

in Petrograd by German train, immediately labeling him a German agent. As Lenin's popularity soared, Thompson's dispatches grew increasingly alarmed; he called for Lenin's arrest, predicting that "the day will come when everything here will be in his power."

At the frontline

With credentials from Alexander Kerensky's Provisional Government, Thompson visited the Galician front in June 1917, filming combat footage from the Russian side of World War I. He used innovative techniques, such as raising a camera on a pole equipped with a motor and viewing through a

The monk Rasputin seated with his entourage of court ladies. Rasputin claimed to be able to heal Alexei Nikolaevich Romanoff of hemophilia and thus held great sway over the Tzar and Tzarina. (Photograph by Thompson, from *Donald Thompson in Russia* (1918)).

periscope, to safely film over trenches. Despite initial optimism, the Russian offensive collapsed within weeks, and morale at the front deteriorated.

Thompson (circle) at the Dvinsk front behind his Aeroscope camera, which is on the parapet. June 1917. Thompson shaved his head as a remedy for Russian cooties (head lice). (Courtesy *Leslie's Weekly*, 20 October 1917)

Returning to Petrograd, Thompson witnessed the July Days uprising, where protests devolved into street

battles. In one encounter, he was briefly jailed, only to be freed when revolutionaries stormed the police station. He armed himself with a revolver and tied a red armband to his arm to avoid being shot —symbolically joining the revolution he was documenting. By August 1917, sensing imminent Bolshevik victory, Thompson left Russia via Japan, smuggling his uncensored footage out of the country.

The German Curse in Russia

Premiering in December 1917, *The German Curse in Russia* was a five-reel silent film combining Thompson's Russian Revolution footage with a pointed political narrative. The opening title set the tone: "Since March 1917, the world believes that Russia treacherously forsook her allies, but records from my diary and camera will show that Russia's anarchy was not willed by her people, but was caused by vile German intrigue working in the unthinking masses." This framing reflected Thompson's conviction that Germany's intelligence operations, rather than Russian popular will, caused Russia's collapse.

The film opened with a menacing close-up of Kaiser Wilhelm II, introduced as "Emperor of all the Huns", whom American audiences by then recognized as cinema's archvillain. Reviewers noted Thompson's deliberate use of propaganda techniques: titles spelled "germany" without a capital letter, in contrast to "AMERICA", and scenes of chaos in Petrograd were juxtaposed with heroic images of Russian soldiers marching to the front.

Among the film's most striking images were those of the Women's Death Battalions—female combat units formed in a desperate bid to inspire the demoralized Russian army. Thompson's still photographs and Axelbank's surviving footage confirm that he filmed commander Maria Bochkareva alongside British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst. Other movie scenes that we were able to pinpoint include funeral processions for revolution victims, Bolshevik May Day rallies, Kronstadt sailors, and Petrograd street fighting. Some of the film's World War I combat scenes, once attributed to Russian cameramen, match Thompson's photographs from the Galician front, suggesting

British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst and Maria Bochkareva, commander of the 1st Women's Death Battalion, filmed by Thompson. Scene identified by the authors in the documentary From *Tsar to Lenin.*

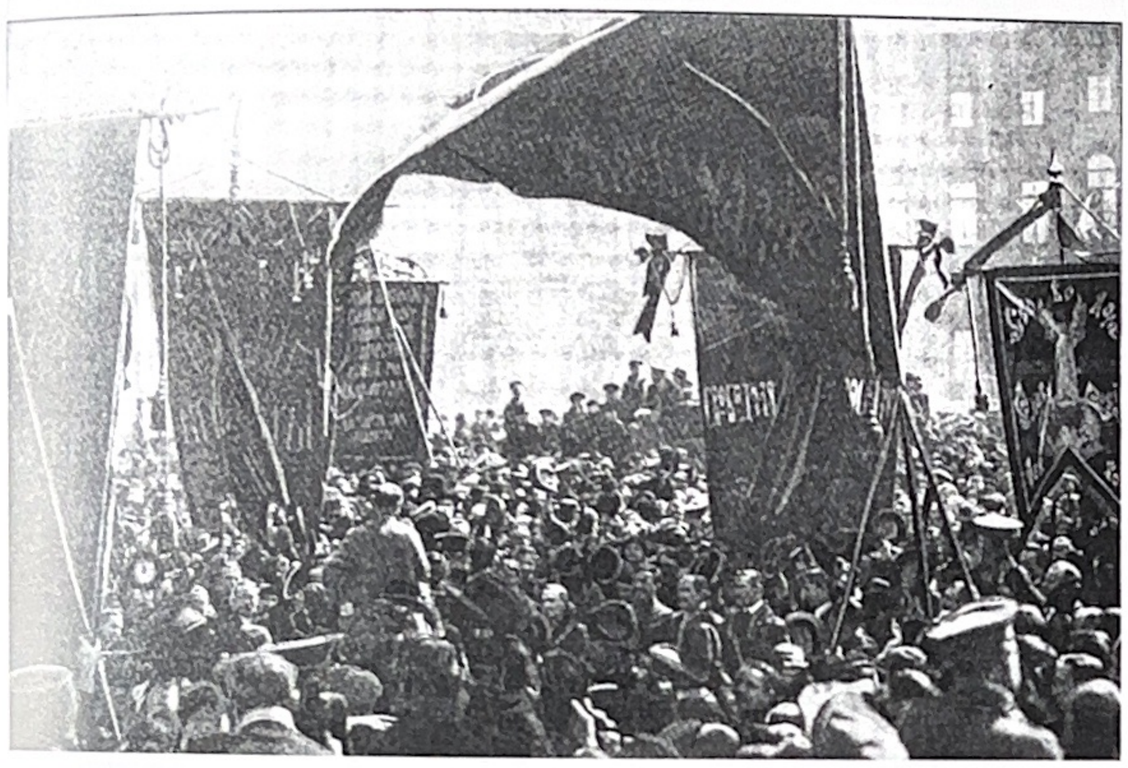
that he personally shot much of this rare material. The climactic scene in *The German Curse in Russia* contrasted a close-up of Kaiser Wilhelm with a portrait of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. At the film's New York premiere, audiences wildly cheered Wilson's image, underscoring the film's propagandistic power.

Reception and legacy

Critics praised *The German Curse in Russia* for its vivid depiction of Russia's turmoil. *Motion Picture News* noted the film's "suggestion of chaos" as soldiers, civilians, and propagandists filled Petrograd's streets, while *Variety* reported that audiences roared with approval at its patriotic finale. For Americans entering World War I, the film offered both dramatic entertainment and reassurance: Russia's withdrawal from the war was portrayed not as betrayal or defeat but as a German-engineered tragedy.

For decades the film disappeared from sight until Herman Axelbank's extensive Russian film collection was researched. Surviving bills of sale from the 1920s in the inventory showed that the Jawitz Pictures Corporation – a stock film company based in New York – sold Axelbank footage taken by Thompson in Petrograd and Moscow in 1917. Segments from this

original footage were later edited by Max Eastman into the celebrated documentary *From Tsar to Lenin* (1937). So, by recycling Thompson's war film at least part of this historic footage has been preserved. A number of movie scenes in the documentary from the 1930s were recognized by the authors by comparing Eastman's final cut with Thompson's still photographs and shooting style. The Axelbank collection, now at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, may contain more World War I film taken by Thompson, which definitely merits further research.



Lenin addressing a Petrograd crowd, photographed by Thompson on July 16, 1917.
(from *Donald Thompson in Russia (1918)*).

Though shaped by Thompson's anti-German bias and conservative politics, *The German Curse in Russia* remains one of the few contemporary visual records of the Russian Revolution's street battles, key figures, and atmosphere of upheaval. Its discovery not only enriches the historical record but also reminds us of the power of moving images to shape collective memory.

In Thompson's own time, his films were powerful propaganda tools. Today, stripped of their original intertitles and dramatic narration, they provide something even more valuable: a rare, unfiltered glimpse into a nation in collapse, preserved by an American cameraman who operated his Aeroscope camera while bullets shattered the windows beside him.

Thompson's postwar journeys

Thompson's return to Russia in 1918, this time to document the American Red Cross during the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War, marked the beginning of a new chapter in his globetrotting career. In 1920, he set off on an ambitious tour across Asia. With a portable film lab, Thompson recorded daily life in regions then rarely seen on Western screens—from Borneo to Mongolia and from the Philippines to China. In Bangkok, he filmed a 30-acre opium factory. Unfortunately, his footage of the plant was stolen.

Settling in California by the mid-1920s, Thompson never gave up the freelance spirit that had driven him through war zones and revolutions. He claimed to have filmed the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the Spanish Civil War, interviewed Hitler and Mussolini, and witnessed the assassination of Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss—though little evidence survives to confirm these extraordinary exploits.

Until his death in 1947, Thompson remained what he had always been: a self-styled eyewitness to history, propelled by wanderlust, bravado and an unwavering belief in the power of his camera. He was, as he

Donald Thompson ca. 1917. He was one of the most daring photographers of the Great War. (From *Donald Thompson in Russia, (1918)*).

confessed himself, a man with a simple philosophy: "I live only to make good pictures and enjoy life".

View *The German Curse in Russia* (1918)

https://youtu.be/z4MP6XSLpAM?si=LxoxfqljcWSKwzTV

Sources:

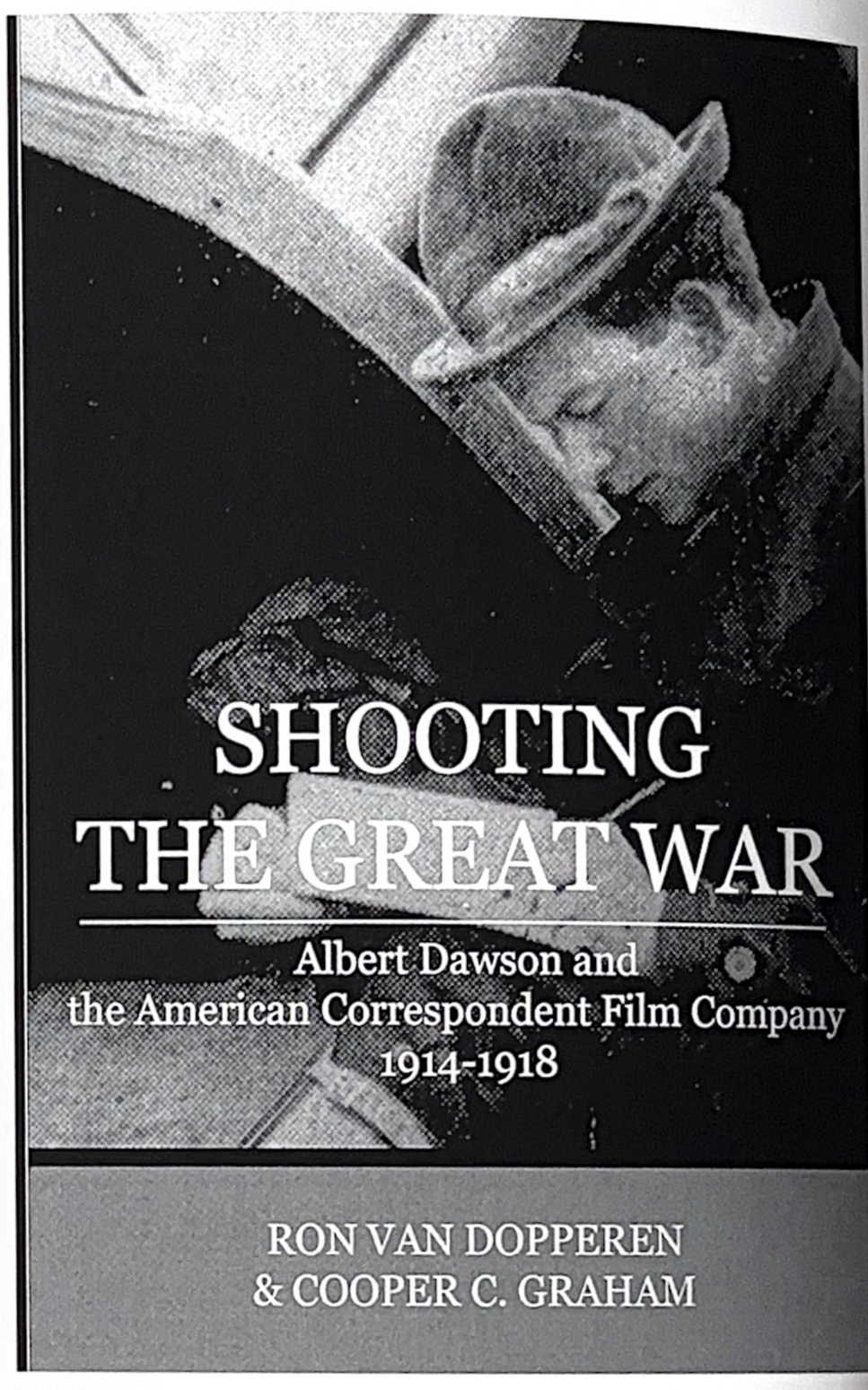
Thompson, D., *Donald Thompson in Russia,* (1918), The Century Co., NY.

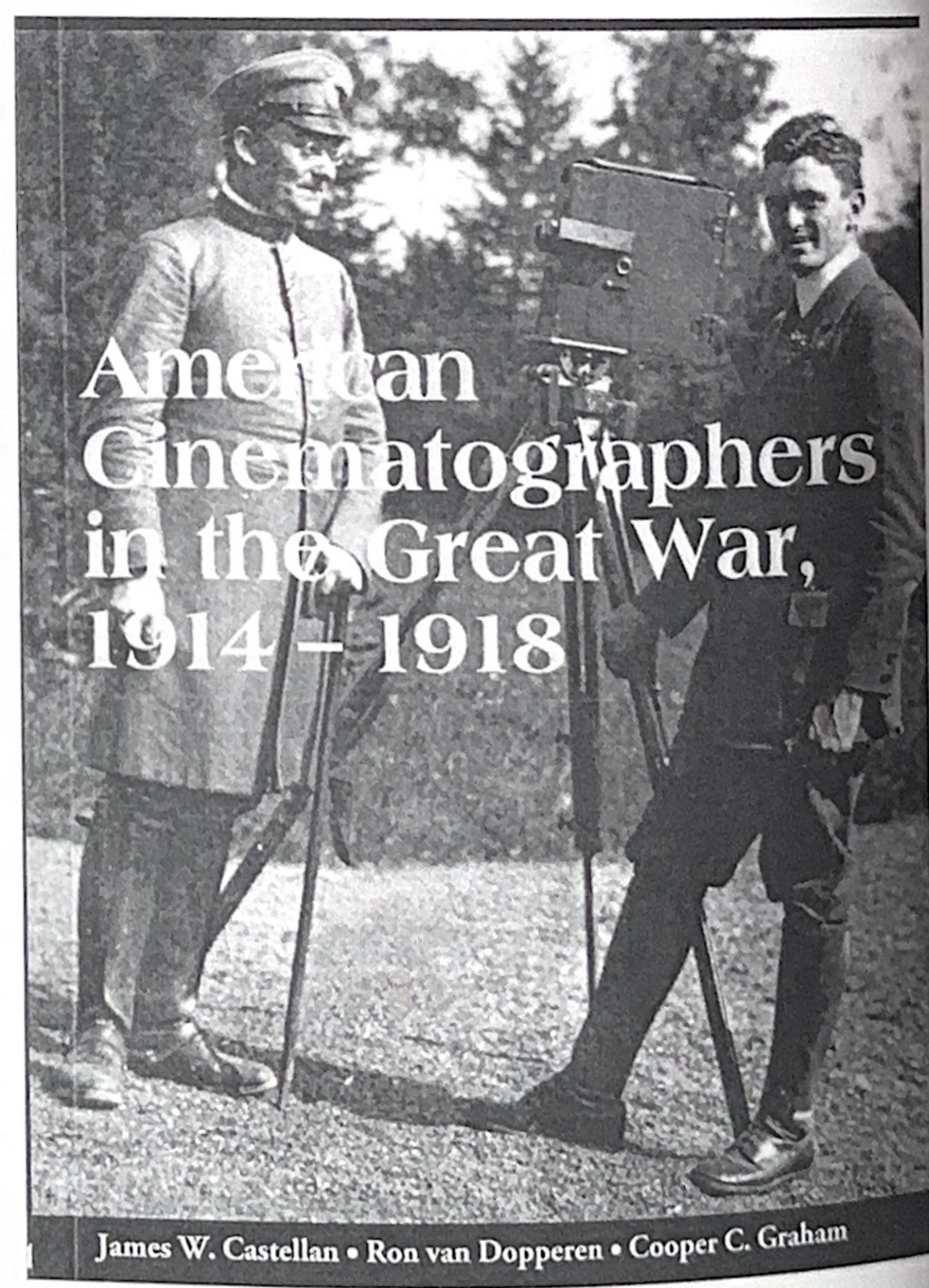
Thompson, D., *Blood Stained Russia*, (1918), Leslie-Judge Co. NY.

About the authors

Ron van Dopperen (left) studied history at the University of Utrecht, Holland, where he wrote his Master of Arts Thesis on the American World War I documentary films. Cooper C. Graham (right) is retired from the Library of Congress where he was a curator in the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division. He is the author of *Leni Riefenstahl's "Olympia"* and (in collaboration) *D.W. Griffith and the Biograph Company.*

Van Dopperen and Graham co-authored *Shooting the Great War: Albert Dawson and the American Correspondent Film Company* (2013) and together with Jim Castellan *American Cinematographers in the Great War* (2014).

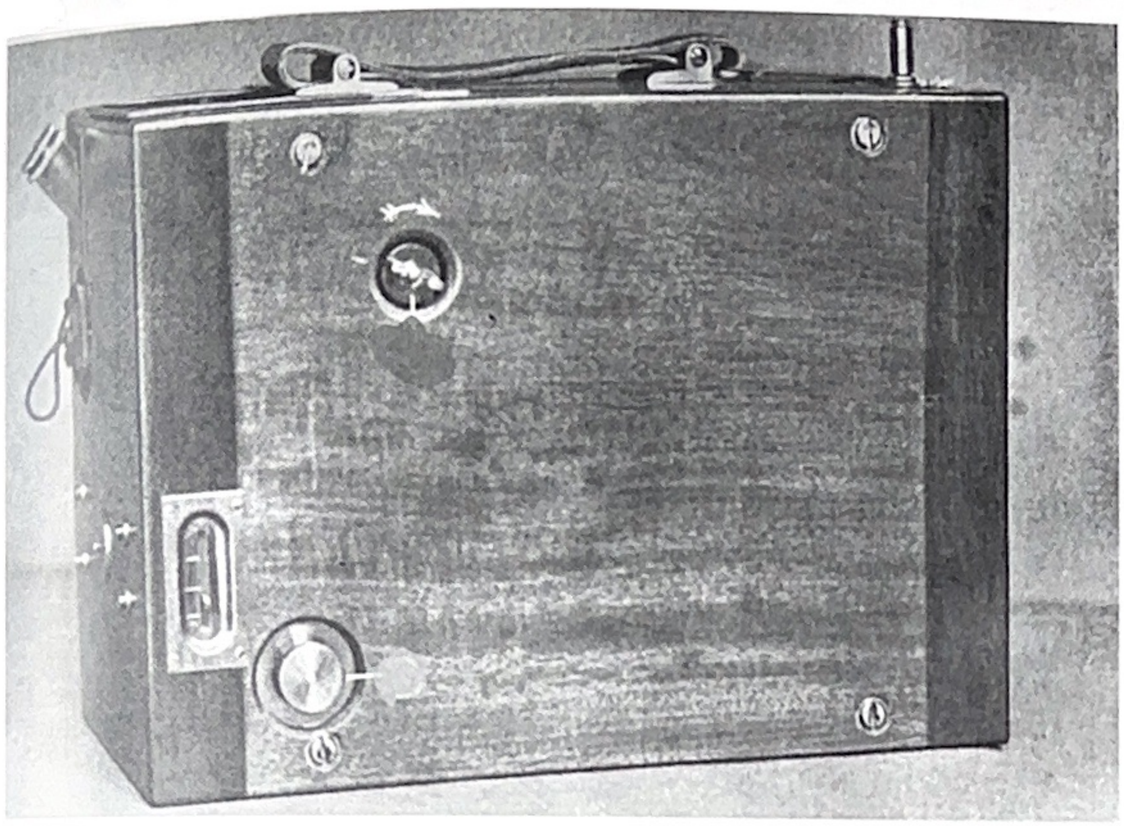




"Pioneering study which has attracted a good deal of attention in the academic and archive world." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*

DONALD THOMPSON'S AEROSCOPE CAMERA

Most motion picture cameras used during World War One were hand cranked (coffee grinders), the camera man advanced the film with a hand crank. Such cameras were mounted on a tripod to steady them while being cranked. There was one camera that was different, it did not require cranking and therefore did not need to be mounted on a tripod. That camera was the Aeroscope.



The Aeroscope camera weighed 14 pounds, and in addition to its utility in war situations, it was a favorite for wildlife photographers. (Source: Talbot, F. A. (1913), *Practical Cinematography and its Applications*, J. B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia)

The Aeroscope camera was invented by Polish engineer Kazimierz Prószyński in 1909 and patented in England in 1910. It was the first successful portable 35mm film camera. Powered by compressed air, thus eliminating the need for a manual crank, the operator could use both hands for controlling the camera. The Aeroscope compressed air tanks were filled manually with an air pump. One air charge was sufficient to expose 400 feet of film. At the standard silent film speed of 16 feet per second, one air charge could result in 11 minutes of footage from a 400-foot roll.

The Aeroscope enabled filming in challenging conditions, such as war zones and from airplanes. It could be hand held or mounted on a tripod. Aeroscope cameras were used during World War One by the British War Office, newsreel filmmakers and film companies. And by Donald Thompson in Russia. (See page 43 for Thompson filming without a tripod from a trench parapet).

Prószyński filming with his invention in Paris, ca. 1909. (Courtesy Wikipedia)

Kazimierz Prószyński (ca 1895) was born in Warsaw in 1875 and educated in Poland and Belgium (Polytechnic University in Liège, Belgium). He lived in England during the First World War and returned to Poland in the 1920s. In 1945, the Gestapo arrested him during the Warsaw Uprising. Prószyński died in the Nazi concentration camp of Mauthausen. He was 69. (Courtesy Wikipedia, https://shorturl.at/lGPqo)

Donald Thompson near the Russian trenches adjusting his tripod-mounted Aeroscope. (From Thompson, D., *Blood Stained Russia*, (1918), Leslie-Judge Co. NY.)

British official cinematographer Lt. Geoffrey Malins filming with a hand-held Aeroscope. The camera was aimed by sighting along the top. (Source: Malins, G. H. (1920), *How I Filmed the War*, Herbert Jenkins Ltd, London)

Lt. Geoffrey Malins holding his Aeroscope. (Source: Malins, G. H. (1920), *How I Filmed the War*, Herbert Jenkins Ltd, London)